

...that since 1945 North Korea's once-diverse and vibrant religious community has largely disappeared?

North Korea's reactions to new sanctions, including its latest nuclear threats and declaration invalidating the 1953 Armistice ending the Korean War, have topped recent news. Equally noteworthy is that today, March 11, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) is focusing on North Korea's deplorable human rights and religious freedom record. The UNHCR will be reviewing that record as they consider an international inquiry into possible crimes against humanity committed by one of the world's most repressive regimes. A vote on this resolution is expected later in March.

The North Korean government controls nearly every aspect of its citizens' daily lives, including religious activity. North Korea seeks to guarantee that no religious group or belief can challenge the cult of personality surrounding the Kim family, often called *Juche*. All religious activity is either tightly controlled or actively suppressed.

Despite North Korean law that criminalizes leaving the country without state permission, over the past decade, hundreds of thousands of people fled to neighboring China and South Korea to escape persecution and famine. Over the past few years, refugees report that the government is imposing harsher penalties for repatriated North Koreans, the harshest treatment reportedly reserved for refugees suspected of becoming Christian, distributing illegal religious materials, or having ongoing contact with either South Korean humanitarian or religious

organizations working in China. Refugees also continue to provide credible evidence that security forces use torture during interrogation sessions. Those suspected of religious conversation or contacts are sent to hard labor facilities designated for political prisoners.

In its 2012 report, USCIRF recommended that the U.S. government fully implement the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2008, which provides the agenda and tools to conduct human rights diplomacy in North Korea. Since 2001, the State Department has designated North Korea as a “country of particular concern,” (CPC) for its severe, egregious, and ongoing violations of religious freedom.